

Notice to Agricultural Merchants and Consumers: Preserving Florida's Environment and Agriculture

Americans have grown accustomed to seeing healthy varieties of food at supermarkets, diverse selections of plants at their local nurseries, and marvelous animals, trees, and ornamental plants at local zoos and parks. However, people do not always realize the protective measures the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) and other agencies take to preserve these environmental and agricultural resources.

APHIS touches the lives of all Americans by ensuring the availability of domestic and imported foods in the marketplace, facilitating the exportation of agricultural commodities to foreign countries, and preserving the vitality of U.S. public and private lands. APHIS is also responsible for regulating agricultural commodities brought into the United States. Many commodities are prohibited entry into the United States because they may harbor alien invasive species—exotic plant and animal pests and diseases—that could seriously damage America's crops, livestock, and environment.

Florida Under Siege

Agricultural smugglers place America's agriculture, economy, environment, and food supply at risk. Because they circumvent legal importation requirements, smugglers present a great risk of introducing plant and animal pests and diseases into the United States that cost millions of dollars to eradicate.

Smugglers illegally avoid U.S. restrictions and safeguards designed to exclude plant and animal pests and diseases, as well as alien invasive species. These products also often fall well short of high sanitation and health standards maintained by American farmers.

Because of its tropical climate, unique animal and plant life, and robust \$6 billion agriculture industry, Florida is inherently susceptible to the introduction of foreign plant and animal pests and diseases.

The State has been plagued by repeated outbreaks of exotic pests and diseases over the past few years. USDA and the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS) spent about \$25 million to eradicate Mediterranean fruit fly (Medfly) outbreaks from Tampa and surrounding areas in 1997; efforts to eradicate bacterial citrus canker from Florida currently cost more than \$10 million annually.

But these eradication expenses alone do not reflect the full impact on Florida growers. The full impact must include lost production areas and lost opportunities to market products in domestic and foreign markets. The costs of controlling and eradicating pest and disease outbreaks are ultimately borne by consumers in the form of higher grocery costs.

In addition to losing production areas because of regulatory actions, growers also suffer from smugglers' unfair business practices. Smugglers undercut local markets by selling their high-risk products, which may not meet basic sanitation and pesticide residue safeguard requirements, at much lower prices. Several producers in south Florida have been put out of business because of this unfair competition.

Enforcing the Law

In response to the growing volume of smuggled and improperly imported agricultural products entering the United States, APHIS' Plant Protection and Quarantine and FDACS have recently launched the Florida Interdiction and Smuggling Team (FIST), a group of specially trained officers from Federal and State regulatory agencies. Specializing in smuggling interdiction and trade compliance, FIST officers investigate and bring agricultural smugglers to justice. These investigators determine the pathways through which prohibited products enter the United States, and then seize and destroy all prohibited materials at the law-breaker's expense. If warranted, FIST pursues civil or criminal penalties. Some of APHIS' national smuggling interdiction efforts have led to grand jury indictments, as well as hundreds of thousands of dollars in fines and seized, prohibited agricultural products.

High-Risk Produce

Although they may look luscious and wholesome, illegally imported fruits and vegetables may harbor a variety of agricultural pests and diseases. Many fruits and vegetables from certain foreign countries are restricted from entering the United States because exotic fruit flies and other pests and diseases are known to occur in these countries.

Medfly, citrus canker, and melaleuca are a few examples of alien invasive species that have had a huge impact on Florida residents, growers, and the State's environment in recent years. Medfly is a devastating pest of more than 200 varieties of fruits, nuts, and vegetables. Citrus canker, a serious disease of most citrus, causes lesions on leaves, stems, and fruit, as well as premature fruit drop. In Florida, not only is there an abundance of commercial citrus crops to serve as hosts, but there is a plethora of backyard citrus, as well. Melaleuca and other noxious weeds threaten to crowd out native Florida vegetation and deplete essential natural resources, including unique ecosystems such as the Everglades.

These threats are real. Each year, APHIS intercepts an increasing number of plant pests and infested agricultural products in Florida that could destroy ecosystems and agriculture across America, as well as negatively impact the U.S. food supply. The following are among a few of the high-risk agricultural products prohibited or restricted entry into the United States from certain countries:

avocado	mango
citrus	papaya
durian	rambutan
guava	red rice
kaffir lime	star apple
litchi	tejocote
longan	pomelo

Meat and Meat Products

Animal disease organisms can live for months in meat and meat products, such as sausage and many types of canned hams sold abroad. Foot-and-mouth disease, African swine fever, and classical swine fever (hog cholera) are a few of the several livestock diseases that could cost billions of dollars to eradicate if introduced to U.S. livestock. These diseases are not present in the United States but are known to occur in many foreign countries from which travelers and importers bring meat products.

All meat shipments regardless of amount or purpose, except for small amounts of commercially canned meat for personal consumption, must be accompanied by official foreign government meat inspection certificates. These certificates, in part, establish country of origin and the specific processing. The type of processing varies depending on the animal disease situation in the country from which the meat originates. Commercially canned meat is allowed if the inspector can determine that the meat was cooked in the can after it was sealed, thus making the product shelf-stable without refrigeration.

More Than Agriculture at Stake

When smuggled agricultural products skirt APHIS' health and quality safeguards, pathways are opened for the introduction of undesirable pests and diseases to enter the United States. Illegally imported agricultural products present a great threat to U.S. agriculture and trade, but some of them can also pose potential human health risks, such as: bovine spongiform encephalopathy (mad cow disease); highly pathogenic avian influenza (Asian bird flu); or eosinophilic meningitis or eosinophilic gastroenteritis, potentially lethal diseases carried by snails, slugs, and rodents.

In addition to introducing pests and diseases, smuggled meat products are often inferior and fail to meet basic safeguard and sanitation requirements.

Additional Information

Smuggled and illegally imported agricultural products affect everybody in Florida in one way or another: from the potential destruction of local ecosystems and depletion of natural resources to the devastation of U.S. agriculture and America's food supply. APHIS needs your help in protecting these vital resources. If you suspect any agricultural smuggling, please contact your local FIST officer immediately. Your confidentiality will be maintained.

If you have any questions about the FIST program or if you want to report smuggling activity, please call one of the following numbers:

Fort Lauderdale: (954) 356-7252
 Fort Myers: (941) 768-4758
 Fort Pierce: (561) 464-1038
 Gainesville: (352) 331-3990
 Jacksonville: (904) 396-2363
 Miami: (305) 536-4758
 Orlando: (407) 648-6856
 Tampa: (813) 228-2121
 West Palm Beach: (561) 844-9935

If you have questions about the legal importation of foreign plant and animal products, contact the USDA Import Permit Unit at (301) 734-8645 or check the APHIS Website (www.aphis.usda.gov/oa/imex.html).

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